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Responding to terrorism: a multi-perspective issue

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From politics, academia and the world of diplomacy, they came with different views and consequently, observations on a global pandemic called terrorism. One common denominator, however, was the personal experiences that, by the admissions of the speakers, have shaped their views on a 21st century phenomenon, powerful and personal enough to transform the world's way of life.

Responding to Terrorism: Political, Philosophical and Legal Perspectives (Ashgate, 2008) was the focus of the forum and title of the latest hardcover by authors, Singapore Management University (SMU) philosophy professor T. Brian Mooney, University of Newcastle senior research fellow Robert Imre, senior lecturer at University of Notre Dame Benjamin Clarke. Present to share political observations and insights were guest speakers, Dr Richard Anthony O'Brien, ambassador of Ireland to Singapore, Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, high commissioner of India to Singapore, and Howard Hunter, president of SMU.

Global versus Western Perspectives

"Some people seem to think terrorism is fairly new but this issue, and its many forms, has been with us for a long time and in many ways, it has and remains an effective way of control for many governments," noted Hunter. The evolution of terrorism has brought on some interesting developments; long before bombers crashed themselves into buildings, taking the lives of thousands of people, the ethics of suicide were already being questioned. Before, it was the self-annihilation of Buddhist monks in Saigon, today we see the same self-immolation but in another form – suicide bombers. "People have picked up on (past) methodologies and used it to express their views on the world," Hunter added.

The complex and globalised 21st century have brought enormous benefits; people, goods, technologies and ideas travel across continents quickly. So does terror, as revealed "so spectacularly in the outrageous horrors inflicted on the United States on 11 September 2001. Overnight, the response to a new global terrorism became a global priority – an enduring priority," O'Brien noted. Despite the looming threat and ability of terrorism to annihilate swiftly, globalisation has yet to counteract with a correspondingly swift response. It may well be, as Subrahmanyam observed, that "most mainstream writings about terrorism focus exclusively on Western cultures."

"Ask an average observer what alerted the world to the real threat of terrorism and most will say 9/11. What about the amount of tangible and intangible destruction the Bali bombings caused? And before 9/11, the bombing of an Air India airplane right under the watch of security personnel? It may have been the world's most serious civil aviation incident, yet the verdict is still open and the bombers have gotten away with murder," Subrahmanyam added.

The examples highlight incidences that may be just as equally significant as those inflicted in the West, as Subrahmanyam said: "In some parts of the world, you have continuous incidents of 9/11 happening throughout 20 years". But if terror strikes outside Western territories, the magnitude of such incidences tend to be sidelined. He adds that if we are to fashion a global response to terrorism, it cannot be based on the rest of the world merely responding to what's happening in the West. Indeed, the kinds of emotions stirred with each passing incident are not limited by geography.

The Personal Perspective

To expand the understanding of terrorism and its effects, Mooney advocates the sharing of stories – both personal and national - stories that "indicate just how deeply the problems of intellectual and affective identity shape the contours of a life, and how bigotry and myopia can be deeply engrained in a psyche as a result of what befalls and which only later take the shape of an intellectual position," he said.

Delving into three years of first-hand insights, gathered from his experience as a hostage negotiator in the Indian force (where in one instance, his father was a hostage), Subrahmanyam adds that for many people, personal stories and experiences illustrate that terrorism is more than an academic issue, for "It impinges on our daily lives and shapes our professional outlook. The intensity with which many of us participate in debates about terrorism is derived from these personal experiences."

Recounting his personal experiences with airport security, Hunter noted the irony that terrorism has had many effects on our lives which we take for granted in that "we subject ourselves to the loss of privacy, dignity and so on, just so we can get from one place to another," he said. George W Bush may have said 'we cannot let terrorism

stop us from living as free people', but he observed that "terrorists do have some control over our lives, as governments have increased daily security in response to their acts. We cannot cure terrorism but we can find ways to come to terms with it so we can lead effective, interesting lives. The key is to choose treatments that don't destroy the values of the civilisations we create." In this regard, politics and policies play crucial roles, in the manner to which they respond to acts of terrorism.

An Inclusive Response

Political moves, in any shape or form, have the ability to stir groups and incite upheavals. In the case of Ireland, the majority of Catholics and Nationalists in the North who were not prepared to "play the role of second class citizens" in their own society, chose an atypical exhibition of their dismay towards their country. They sang the songs of the Civil Rights Movement of the United States rather than songs of Irish republicanism; they chanted the language of Martin Luther King instead of slogans of Irish nationalism in a revolutionary show of their demands for civil, political, economic and social rights within Northern Ireland. This atypical demonstration would have required a fresh and creative response. However, the failure to put that in place led to confrontation and repressions, the collapse of law and order, soldiers on the streets and widespread violence.

O'Brien believes "A major lesson gleaned from the experience of Ireland is that those who are part of the problem should be part of the solution, not because there is some approval for their actions or beliefs, but because without including the relevant parties, it is all too easy for an agreement to be undermined. Inclusivity becomes crucial." This belief led to the decision of the British and Irish governments to engage Sinn Féin in talks. Today, many leaders continue to question the need to include ethnic or armed groups from outside the political mainstream in peace negotiations.

To create honourable peace agreements, effective leaders need to question if the collective interest of authoritative figures, such as politicians, public servants, soldiers and policemen, should be taken into account. Governing bodies must also consider political and diplomatic dialogue, the role of civil society, as well as the lives of the communities who struggle with memories, wounds and prejudices inherited from the past. "Political agreement alone will not deliver a functioning society and neither will individual acts of generosity do away with the need for suitable and sustainable political structures," O'Brien noted.

Facilitation as a Response

Terrorism can be an instrument of diplomacy and sympathetic third parties can often be of much help. In the case of Ireland, the EU facilitated a breakthrough in Anglo-Irish relations; the engagement of the US gave Ireland a voice in Whitehall and Westminster; and former US president Clinton helped bring the Belfast Agreement through difficult discussions to reach the finish line. O'Brien observed that external parties assist governments insofar as to "take risks for peace; sometimes by virtue of their status, other times by virtue of their constructive engagement, many times by virtue of both, third parties can help create a centre of gravity in a process and clarify its parameters."


O'Brien pointed out that one only has to look at the US-led multilateral negotiations in attempts to end North Korea's nuclear programmes to understand how close this issue hits home.


Desperation as a response

A hardline approach to terrorism may be tempting in times of desperation, but is the torture of perpetrators ever justifiable, even if the underlying motivation is to save lives? Mooney pointed out that security services are often caught in a quandary – to torture ringleaders as bombs tick away so they can extract information to hopefully save thousands, or do nothing and potentially ignore the value of those lives?

Torture is vigorously prohibited as stated in the deeply cherished beliefs of many international treaties such as the United Nations 1975 resolution. The take that torture is morally legitimate in dire situations is not a straightforward one and Mooney suggests it is the mark of a good government to ponder over every decision. Subrahmanyam notes that history has shown victories through restraint – a value hard to flaunt in these trying times of counter-terrorism, as the fundamental act of teaching forces its purpose; and its application is often the "hardest lesson". The biggest challenge facing diplomats today is drawing up a cohesive international response, said Subrahmanyam. Sadly, the belief in many countries remains that "this is not my problem".

Mooney notes "The difficulty this contemporary world presents is not that there is a lack of reason but that there are too many incommensurable accounts of rationality, each of which has its own criteria for what constitutes reasonableness. This is a long, difficult path which is never assured of success. We cannot give up on reason but we need a more ancient and broader approach to reasonableness, in order to respond appropriately to terrorism."

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